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ABSTRACT

Libraries serve our nation and its citizens in two primary ways: by preserving our common culture, and by nurturing and sustaining democracy itself. A particular democratic function of libraries is fostering reading. As noted in two reports recently issued by the U.S. Department of Education, "What Works" and "First Lessons," it is imperative to develop our children's reading ability, and libraries are essential to achieving this goal. Libraries should not only preserve; they should promote learning and literature--librarians should be advocates as well as custodians. Moreover, the library is an essential part of the school and, as key members of a school's education team, librarians can contribute to the content of education by thinking carefully about the books they acquire for the library and by making a judicious selection of the books they wish to promote. Although technological innovations have led to enormous changes in the operations of libraries, the preservation and nurture of our culture and our nation are still the functions of libraries. Good books and good librarians are indispensible to the attainment of this goal. (KM)

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UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

ANNUAL CONFERENCE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

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I'd like to begin today with a little history. It has to do with events near the beginning of the last century, during the War of 1812.

We have been fortunate in this century never to have had to fight a war on American soil. The War of 1812 was fought in many of the states of the time, and it struck at the very heart of the nation. In August 1814, British troops invaded the city of Washington. The President and Congress were able to flee the city and escape harm, but behind they left the first proud monuments of the fledgling democracy. These the British burned: the new Executive Mansion, the Capitol, and a building recently constructed to house the Congress's library, then called the Library of the United States.

The library was a small one, comprising about 3000 volumes, but its burning was denounced both here and in Europe. It signified to the world, as Thomas Jefferson wrote from Monticello, the triumph of vandalism over art and science.

When it came to reviving the library, it was the aging democrat in Virginia who provided a solution. Jefferson offered to sell the government his own private collection. It was a collection he had built over 40 years, browsing through the bookshops of Paris and ordering from dealers around the world.

"It is the choicest collection of books in the United States," Jefferson wrote, "and I hope it will not be without some general effect on the literature of our country." And so, for just about $24,000, the United States purchased the personal library of one of her most learned and most accomplished statesmen. Thomas Jefferson's personal library constituted the core of what has become our great national library.

I begin with this story to illustrate what I consider to be the indivisible relationship between our nation, its liberties, and its libraries. It is no coincidence, I think, that one of the men most instrumental in founding this nation was instrumental also in founding its great national library, the greatest library in the world. Indeed, we could say that in establishing the Library of Congress, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence was striking a second blow for American education, and a second for the American republic as well.

Allow me to refer for a moment to one of my own personal heroes, a man who was a friend and colleague of Jeffersons's for 50 years: James Madison. Madison himself was the principal architect of our government and one of the original proponents of a Congressional library. He wrote -- and these words can be found today inscribed on the wall of the Madison Building of the Library of Congress: "Learned institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people."

How do libraries serve a free people? How do they serve our country? In many ways, but I think we can delineate two chief

functions. First, libraries serve the nation by preserving our common culture. Libraries act as the repository of those supreme expressions of the human spirit that have inspired and guided our ancestors through the centuries: what Matthew Arnold called the best that has been thought and written. In so doing, they maintain the all-important intellectual commerce between the ages; they enable us to learn and build from the trials, errors, and achievements of those who have gone before. Libraries also maintain that common core of knowledge which provides the basis of intelligent communication among ourselves today. In short, libraries help maintain our civilization. For, as Professor E. D. Hirsch of the University of Virginia has written, "no culture exists that is ignorant of its own traditions."

A second and related function of our libraries is to nurture and sustain democracy itself. As Thomas Jefferson knew, the health of a democracy depends on an informed citizenry. The full exercise of our rights and responsibilities as citizens requires a knowledge of the ideas and values underlying our nation, as expressed in key documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Being an active American also requires an understanding of the defense and development of those values and ideas through the last two centuries.

Today, particularly because I am speaking to you, an audience of school librarians, librarians for children, I would like to

emphasize this particular democratic function of libraries: fostering reading. Even more rudimentary to citizenship than knowledge is possession of the ability to read. For the young -- and for adults as well -- libraries are one of the most important places for the cultivation of reading: for gaining basic command of the language, and for strengthening that command through daily practice. Fostering reading is the most fundamental of our libraries' contribution to the nation's welfare. Libraries are temples of literacy.

These, then, are the two essential ways in which our libraries -- school, university, and public libraries -- serve the nation: they preserve our culture and they nourish our democracy. This was the special role envisioned for libraries in the Founders' day, and it is the role that they fulfill in ours; it is a role for which I -- as an admirer of Madison and Jefferson, as a representative of our government and as a philosopher -- salute you, our librarians.

This Spring, as I hope you all know, the Education Department issued a practical guide to teaching and learning called What Works. This guide received much praise, but there were occasional complaints that the book ignored libraries, school libraries in particular. There was even one claim that What Works was a "disservice" to librarians.

I must say, the criticism came as a surprise to me. Because, though What Works does not include a separate section on

libraries, the concerns of libraries and librarians run throughout. They permeate the sections called "Reading to Children," "Reading Comprehension," and "Independent Reading"; they are at the heart of the sections on "Storytelling," "History," and "Cultural Literacy." So yes, the library is not addressed individually in What Works -- neither, I would point out, is the art studio, the science lab, the gymnasium, or the museum. But libraries are intertwined with many of the suggestions we make. They are implicit throughout the book. Libraries are essential to applying the lessons of What Works, just as sure as they are essential to nearly every aspect of the education of our children.

No book, I would add, so devoted to encouraging reading, learning, and educational excellence, could possibly render a disservice to our librarians. If lingering discontent remains, however, now's your chance: the Department is at work on a supplement to What Works, and each of you is invited to submit research findings that you think should be included in the next volume.

Recently, I issued another report, this one intended to help improve elementary education. It is called First Lessons, and it is the first national report on the condition of our elementary schools since 1953: all too long a period of neglect, in my opinion, for one of the most important, most formative institutions in our society.

In First Lessons I say that, by and large, our elementary schools are doing pretty well. In the first few grades especially, things look good. I did find, however, that in the later grades students' performance begins to decline. And in the report I note several areas in which that performance could be improved.

The first of these, perhaps the most important of these, is reading. Right now, our children's reading ability is below what it should be. According to the latest report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 40 percent of 13-year-olds lack the intermediate reading skills necessary to handle the books and lessons that we would expect a seventh or eighth grade teacher to assign.

How can we make our children better readers? Well, as I say in First Lessons, teaching reading is no mystery. We know that it helps when parents begin reading to their children when they are very young. It helps when they discuss stories with them. And when children enter school, it is important that they are taught through phonics.

We also know that, once children have grasped the fundamentals, one of the most important ways to improve their reading abilities is reading itself. Children read better when they read a lot. Yet right now, in the average elementary school, students spend an average of just 7 to 8 minutes a day reading

silently. At home, half of all fourth graders spend only 4 minutes a day reading.

This is why in First Lessons I write:

> Books should be a part of every child's life. They should occupy a central place in home and classroom alike. Children should have at their fingertips books like Where the Wild Things Are, Charlotte's Web and Winnie the Pooh. [Older students, I would add, should be surrounded by books like the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Federalist.] This is the only way they will really grasp the idea that reading is a joy rather than a burden.

This time, let me spell it out. All this emphasis on books and reading means libraries. Libraries provide the books. They provide guidance in choosing among books. They furnish a quiet, accessible place to read the books. This is why, in First Lessons -- in a section called "Libraries" -- I wrote: "By the end of the 1986-87 school year, every child should obtain a library card -- and use it." Children seeking enjoyable, valuable books suited to their individual abilities and interests will find a specially suited guide in their school librarian.

I have called libraries "repositories" of our culture. This they are: conserving, preserving, protecting is certainly an essential part of their function. But as this audience well knows, libraries are not exactly dead solemn and silent places. Nor, all things considered, should they be. Reading itself is a rigorous form of mental exercise, and an unfailing source of pleasure. Likewise, every library should be an active, central, conspicuous forum for that exercise, that pleasure, and the

cultivation that they bring. Libraries should not just preserve; they should promote.

And at the center of that promotion of learning and literacy must be you, our librarians. Just as libraries are not mere storerooms, so librarians are not mere guards. In our children's daily lives, the librarian is the the most prominent representative of all the joys and pleasures that accompany reading. And the best librarian is an advocate for reading: an active, vocal, and heeded ambassador of books and reading.

In the current movement for education reform, we have grown accustomed to looking far afield for valuable allies: we have turned to businessmen, legislators, and community groups for help in improving our schools and our children's education. This is good. Schools need allies. But I will be frank: in some cases, while searching so widely, some educators have failed to look a bit closer to home. Some have failed to turn to their librarians. You are an invaluable but not yet fully appreciated ally in the campaign for education reform.

The library is an essential part of the school, and librarians are key members of a school's education team. Principals and teachers should work with the school librarian to ensure that students spend at least an hour every week in the library -- looking through the shelves, acquainting themselves with the selection, and reading. Again, this is where the librarian is important, not just as a custodian, but as a teacher, an advisor, and even as a kind of a salesman. Every principal,

every parent, should make sure that the librarian gets to know the students and to learn their interests and needs. Students should look to librarians, as much as to parents and teachers, for books that they will enjoy and that they will benefit from. They're your students, too.

As Secretary of Education, I have outlined three points that I believe should help guide education reform. I call them the three C's: Content, Character, and Choice. Librarians stand to make an especially important contribution to the first of these three C's -- Content.

By Content I refer to the actual substance of what our children study. In recent years we have paid a good deal of attention to the skills imparted in our schools, and much less to the knowledge. I think our children would benefit from a reversal of priorities. Surely one of our loftiest charges in teaching is to teach what we ourselves have valued and enjoyed: as Wordsworth wrote, "What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how." It is the very same mission that our libraries assume in aiming to preserve and promote our cultural heritage.

Librarians can contribute to the content of education, first, by thinking carefully about the books that they acquire for the library. Am I talking about censorship? No, definitely not. But censorship is one thing, and selectivity another. Librarians should certainly be responsive to the tastes of the community. My own guideline, however, is that every rejection of a book should

come with an accompanying recommendation. And there are certain books that every library should surely have. While I was Chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, George Will invited the public in his newspaper column to send me their lists of 10 books that every high school student should read. Among the hundreds of lists that we received, four texts were cited at least 50 percent of the time: Shakespeare's plays, American historical documents -- like the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist -- The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and the Bible. These, and others like them, constitute what Thomas Jefferson called the "few well-chosen books" that should form the core of every library.

Second, librarians can help shore up the content of our children's education through judiciousness in choosing the books in their collections which they wish to promote. What is on the shelves of our libraries and what students are directed toward are two different things. As the schools chief advocates and ambassadors of literature, our librarians need to ask questions like these: Is this a book of enduring quality, one that I read as a child, or that I would want or expect my own children to read? Is it a book that the student will be able to draw on in class, in conversation, or in future reading? Does this book provide valuable moral and intellectual guidance? When the answers to these questions are yes, you have a book that should be out in the open, in the display cases, and you should collar children, teachers and parents to uge it upon them.

In the years since Madison and Jefferson gave life to the Library of Congress, the operation of libraries has changed enormously. We have seen the development of library science, of which Thomas Jefferson was an early pioneer. We have also seen the introduction of many sorts of technology to libraries, providing many new abilities and opportunities. New technology is enabling libraries to preserve aging and fragile documents on film, and thereby to distribute them more widely. It enables them to keep up-to-date on thousands of publications. It enhances communication among libraries, making it easier for you, our school librarians, to work with public libraries to provide a more complete community collection for children.

These technological innovations have led some to call libraries library media centers. Personally, I prefer plain old libraries. Because no matter how much the form of our libraries may change, their function will remain, it must remain, the same: to preserve and nurture our culture and our nation. And as long as this remains their goal, two things will be indispensable: good books and good librarians. Technology can be a valuable aid, a means: the end, still, is reading. And today, as always, our children require the expertise of a concerned and conscientious librarian to guide them to what is best, what is true, in our culture and in our democratic heritage.